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Asean leaders sign landmark charter

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SINGAPORE: Asean leaders signed a long-awaited charter yesterday aimed at transforming their bloc and committing the region's disparate nations to promoting human rights and democratic ideals.

The charter sets out principles and rules for Asean for the first time and creates a regional human rights body — without spelling out what authority the body will have.

The signing ceremony, which came at the end of summit talks among the bloc's 10 leaders, took place under the shadow of a diplomatic row sparked when Myanmar blocked a UN envoy from briefing the annual gathering.

"To make Asean strong and relevant, we must accelerate and deepen regional integration. The Asean charter is a crucial step in this process," summit host Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said.

"It will make Asean a more effective and cohesive organisation, with a rules-based governing framework, and streamlined decision-making processes. All this will pave the way for closer integration in the years ahead."

The charter is the result of a long and controversial drafting process that saw some of the strong recommendations by a group of Asean elder statesmen watered down or dropped.

However, it commits Asean members "to



Solidarity ... Joining hands for a group photograph at the 13th Asean Summit in Singapore yesterday are (from left) President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia, President Choumaly Sayasone of Laos, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo of the Philippines and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore.

strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms".

The Asean leaders also

signed an "economic blueprint" to transform the region into a single market with a unified production base and no tariffs by 2015.

"A free and open investment

regime is key to enhancing Asean's competitiveness in attracting foreign direct investment as well as intra-Asean investment," the Asean Economic Community Blueprint said.